

H.G. Wells: Darwin's disciple and eugenicist extraordinaire

Jerry Bergman

After being exposed to Darwinism in school, H.G. Wells converted from devout Christian to devout Darwinist and spent the rest of his life proselytizing for Darwin and eugenics. Wells advocated a level of eugenics that was even more extreme than Hitler's. The weak should be killed by the strong, having 'no pity and less benevolence'. The diseased, deformed and insane, together with 'those swarms of blacks, and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people ... will have to go' in order to create a scientific utopia. He envisioned a time when all crime would be punished by death because 'People who cannot live happily and freely in the world without spoiling the lives of others are better out of it.' He was hailed as an 'apostle of optimism' but died an 'infinitely frustrated' and broken man, concluding that 'mankind was ultimately doomed and that its prospect is not salvation, but extinction. Despite all the hopes in science, the end must be "darkness still".' Wells' life abundantly illustrates the bankruptcy of consistently applied Darwinism.

Herbert George (H.G.) Wells was one of the most well-known and important late 19th- and early 20th-century science fiction and science writers in the English-speaking world. Some historians claim that he changed the mind of Europe and the world, and for this reason, Wells was called the 'great sage' of his time.¹ Although from a poor family, Wells (born in Bromley, Kent, England, on 21 September 1866) studied at the Normal School of Science in South Kensington under Darwin's chief disciple, Thomas Henry Huxley. Wells completed his Bachelor of Science with first class honours in zoology and second class honours in geology. His doctoral thesis from London University was titled: 'The Quality of Illusion in the Continuity of the Individual Life in the Higher Metazoa with Particular Reference to the Species *Homo sapiens*'. After teaching in private schools for four years, in 1891 Wells began teaching college-level courses. He also married his cousin Isabel the same year.

Wells soon became a writer and, in his long career, authored over 100 books, including such classic best-selling science fiction (a genre he largely invented) as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The First Man on the Moon* (1901). He

also published much general fiction, and later branched out into other areas, including history and science. His best-selling (and still in print) *Outline of History* (1920), and the four-volume *The Science of Life* (1931), in which he and his eldest son, George Phillip Wells, collaborated with Sir Julian Huxley, sold very well. *The Outline of History* alone has sold over two million copies.² Both *The Outline* and *Science of Life* went into great detail to defend the Darwinist worldview.³

For many years, Wells wrote as many as two books a year (a considerable literary output), plus articles in such journals as *The Fortnightly Review*. While he started out writing science fiction, he soon moved on to write books that would help solve what Wells concluded were society's 'deepening social perplexities'.⁴ One of his specializations was predicting the future—which not only expressed itself in his science fiction, but also in such books as *Anticipations* (1902—reprinted in 1999), *Mankind in the Making* (1903), *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *A Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945), the last a work in which he expressed the bleakest pessimism ever presented in any of his books about humankind's future.

From devout Christian to Darwinian atheist

Wells' writings also detail his conversion from theism to Darwinism. He said that when he was young he fully believed the proposition that 'somebody [i.e. God] must have made it all', but later began to conclude that 'there was a flaw in this assumption'.⁵ Wells was both impressed and influenced by Darwin's ideas, but he at first tried to reconcile them with his faith in the 'simple but powerful concept, implanted by his mother's teachings when he was small, that "somebody must have made it all"'.⁶ As a youngster, Wells stated he had a 'crude conception of evolution' but when he got to college he became fully persuaded of its 'truth'.⁵ As a result, he eventually rejected God, Christianity and religion. Among the books that he read was Henry Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. Drummond was a theistic evolutionist who wrote several best-selling books defending Darwinism and trying to harmonize Darwinism and Christianity.

One important reason the devout believer became an atheist was that he had a difficult time accepting both theism and Christianity because, as he stated, when he believed in evolution, he could no longer accept Genesis.⁷ He deduced that if evolution were true, the basis of Christianity, including the Fall and the sacrificial death of Christ to redeem fallen humans, were impossible. His acceptance of the 'new science' of Darwinism 'had dealt telling blows at revealed religion but offered no spiritually rewarding alternative to it'.⁶ Later, when he came across a weekly atheist magazine pretentiously called *The Free Thinker*, his 'worst suspicions' about Christianity were confirmed, and he became a committed atheist. He came to enjoy its agnostic mockeries of religion and theism.⁸ After Wells totally rejected theism, he embraced socialism and, later,

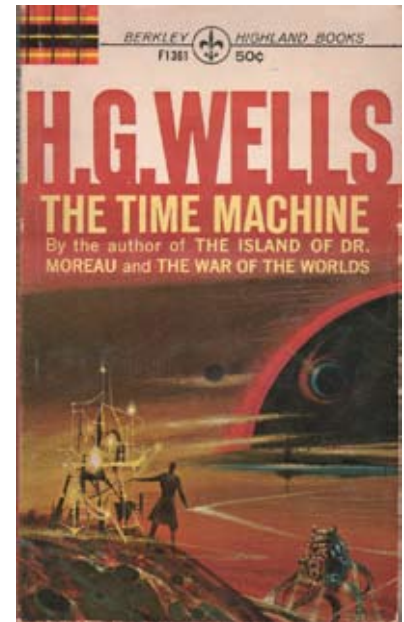
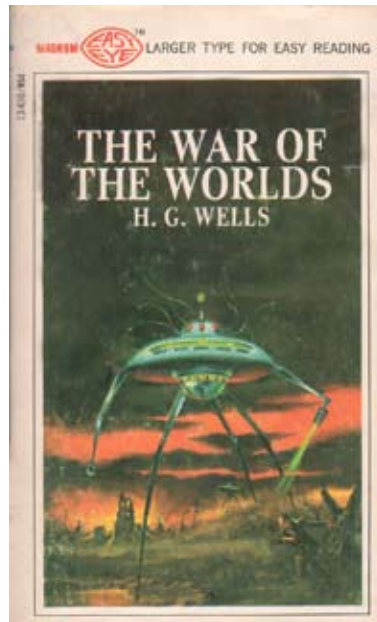
even Soviet-style communism, both of which he also eventually became disillusioned with, and eventually rejected.

While his mentor, T.H. Huxley, is called Darwin's Bulldog for his lifetime of tenacity actively fighting for Darwinism, Wells might be called one of Darwin's chief apostles.⁹ Huxley, Wells and other 'eminent men of science' had an 'almost fanatical faith' that science alone was the answer to 'all human misery'.¹⁰ Toward this end, Wells also was active writing and defending his new religion of Darwinism for his entire life—a 'mission, as capable of arousing enthusiasm as any religious revival'.¹⁰ Even his fiction books actively defended Darwinism. Kemp concluded that Wells' *The Time Machine* was a 'blend of Marx and Darwin'.¹¹

An example of Wells' involvement is his exchange with British Catholic Hilaire Belloc, who wrote a 119-page response to Wells' *Outline of History* titled *Companion to Mr. Wells's Outline of History*,¹² refuting its anti-Christian and pro-Darwinism bias. The book prodded Wells into writing a reply, published later in the same year under the title *Mr. Belloc Objects*.¹³ Gardner concluded that Wells' response to Belloc was written in 'a mood of amused anger'.¹⁴ Mackenzie and Mackenzie called Wells' book 'vituperous', and stated that Wells was 'enraged' with Belloc.¹⁵ Belloc subsequently produced a rebuttal to Wells' *Mr. Belloc Objects*, titled *Mr. Belloc Still Objects*.¹⁶ In this work Belloc defends his position on Darwinism and religion stated in his first book, *Companion to Mr. Wells's Outline of History*.

Eugenics

After Darwinism 'had destroyed the conventional theology' in the minds of most British intellectuals, the question in the mind of many intellectuals was, could Darwin 'provide an alternative basis for morality'?¹⁰ The problem, as Mackenzie and Mackenzie note, was that the 'popular and optimistic gloss on Darwin's theory of evolution had simply replaced the Divine Purpose by the process of natural selection. Man remained the supreme achievement of genetic variation. It was by accepting this substitution that the Anglican Church managed to come to terms with the doctrine of evolution. But Huxley did not accept this benignly complacent view of Nature. Suppose, he asked, the emergence of the human species was merely an accident, and probably a temporary phenomenon. Suppose Nature were at best neutral and at worst hostile. Suppose the evolution of species could as easily lead to stagnation and regression as to progress. Then *Homo sapiens* might be damned as surely by the laws of evolution as by original sin. In both cases there would be a last



judgment'.¹⁷

Wells and many others believed that one part of the solution to this problem was eugenics. Actually, eugenics became for Wells, as well as for many other Darwinians of his time, a key to human salvation. Eugenics was a field in which Wells 'out-Darwinized' Darwin, and one that he championed for most of his adult life. Nowhere is this revealed so vividly as in his book about his hope for the future of humankind, *Anticipations*. This was Wells' first non-fiction bestseller, and a 'fabulous commercial success'.¹⁸ It had 'an enormous impact on British intellectuals and their European counterparts'.¹⁹ This book defended an 'extreme program of negative eugenics'.²⁰ In his own words, Wells advocated favouring

'the procreation of what is fine and efficient and beautiful in humanity—beautiful and strong bodies, clear and powerful minds ... and to check the procreation of base and servile types ... of all that is mean and ugly and bestial in the souls, bodies, or habits of men.'²¹

This goal was to be completed by 'death' or 'mercy killings', and it was expected that those involved in the eugenic world that Wells advocated should have 'no pity and less benevolence ...', and should 'not be squeamish' about inflicting death on the unfit, because those who kill the weak will have a 'fuller sense of the possibilities of life than we possess. They will have an ideal that will make killing worth the while'.²² His concern was to control the 'laws of evolution so that mankind could become their master rather than their victim'.²³

According to Gardner, the 'unfit' that Wells added to his list included persons with

'transmittable diseases, with mental disorders, with bodily deformations, the criminally insane, even the incurable alcoholic! All are to be put to death humanely—by first giving them opiates to spare them

needless suffering!²⁴

Wells advocated not only killing, but also sterilization and birth control, as an effective way to rid the earth of 'inferior' races and peoples.²⁵ Wells believed that evolution, operating on its own, was not 'progressive', but needed to be 'directed' by the educated elite. For this reason, he actively worked toward establishing eugenic programs.

A question on many people's minds then was the place of the Jews and what Wells called 'the inferior races' in society.²⁶ Wells concluded that Jewish faces were 'very ugly', but added that so are many Gentile faces. Wells also concluded that many Jews are intensely vulgar in dress, materialistic and cunning, but added that so are many Gentiles. He believed that intermarriage would eventually cause the Jews to cease to exist as a physically distinct race.

Wells was far less charitable about the darker races. He even concluded that 'those swarms of blacks, and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people ... will have to go'.²⁵ Gardner comments that

'Wells' statements about inferior races, and the use of killing as a tool to weed out the unfit, come perilously close to Hitler's efforts to breed a superior Aryan race, and to "solve the Jewish question" with the aid of gas chambers.'²⁵

Gardner concludes that, as far as he knows, Wells never retracted or even apologized for these statements. In his 1934 autobiography, Wells even called *Anticipations* the keystone to the main arch of his life work. In his autobiography, Wells still advocated ridding the world of what he called the 'unfit', but no longer advocated killing them; instead, he wanted to rely on sterilization, often called the 'soft eugenicist approach' as opposed to Wells' earlier 'hard eugenicist' approach.

An example of the soft eugenicist approach is found in his book *The Work, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind*.²⁷ Wells still advocated isolation and sterilization of the unfit, but now recognized that variety in human beings can have an advantage. Many of his works also advocate a dictatorship by the educated-elite class and disparage the common, less-educated population. For this reason, he was opposed to democracy, and felt that the world should be governed by an enlightened science-trained elite, i.e. the scientists.²⁸ For much of his life, he also actively advocated a world government. As Achenbach noted, Wells' 'scientific utopia, led by a powerful elite, bore an uneasy relationship to the totalitarian horrors of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union'.²⁹

Wells also argued that inferior humans should cause their own death, stating that, in his eugenic world, society will 'naturally regard' the 'suicide of incurably melancholy, or diseased or helpless persons as a high and courageous act of duty rather than a crime'.²² Wells concluded that a long term of imprisonment for persons who commit crimes is 'infinitely worse than death'. Rather than long prison terms ('long' was not defined by Wells, but one may assume that it could be anywhere from one year onwards), the state should

execute any person convicted of a serious crime.²²

For other offenders, Wells recommended that, if a deterrent punishment was necessary, 'good, scientifically caused pain, that will leave nothing but a memory' should be utilized, but he did not go into detail on how this should be done.²² He even argued that the time would come when the *only* punishment would be killing, and because society

'of the coming time will be far less disposed to torture than to kill ... to kill under the seemly conditions science will afford is a far less offensive thing: ... People who cannot live happily and freely in the world without spoiling the lives of others are better out of it.'³⁰

By killing themselves, Wells concluded that they could save society the trouble: 'most of the human types, that by civilised standards are undesirable, are quite willing to die out ... if the world will only encourage them a little'.³¹ It is true that Wells later modified this extreme stand—no doubt greater wisdom and maturity helped him see the foolishness of some of his earlier ideas. Nonetheless, he continued to defend eugenics (see his *Modern Utopia*, chapter five).

Wells and Christianity

As an adult, Wells also had very definite, and strongly negative, ideas about Christianity—for example, he felt the Deity that Christians worshipped was 'absurd',³² but, at first, he could not accept a totally atheistic worldview. He tried for years to replace the Christian God with a god of his own making—a god that allowed him to violate Christian morals, yet gave meaning to the universe and human history. Wells himself would later repudiate God in total, declaring himself 'an honest atheist'.³³ Yet his biographer concluded that Wells' youthful religious beliefs still influenced him, even if unconsciously; he 'always sought to reconcile the scientific concepts he had acquired at South Kensington with the doctrines of evangelical [Christian] belief'.³⁴

Nonetheless, Wells concluded that the ideas of Malthus 'awakened almost simultaneously in the mind of Darwin and Wallace' a set of ideas that 'found expression and demonstration at last in the theory of natural selection'.³⁵ Natural selection, as it

'has been more and more thoroughly assimilated and understood by the general mind, it has destroyed, quietly but entirely, the belief in human equality which is implicit in all the "Liberalising" movements of the world ... it has become apparent that whole masses of human population are, as a whole, inferior in their claim upon the future to other masses, that they cannot be given other opportunities or trusted with power as the superior peoples are trusted, that their characteristic weaknesses are contagious and detrimental in the civilising fabric, and that their range of incapacities tempts and demoralizes the strong. To give them equality is to sink to their level, to protect and cherish them is to be swamped in their fecundity.'³⁶

Furthermore, Wells concluded that 'Darwinism destroyed the dogma of the Fall upon which the whole intellectual fabric of Christianity rests. For without a Fall there is no redemption, and the whole theory and meaning of the Pauline system is vain.'³⁷ Wells continues, noting that scientific discovery has resulted in the loss of 'the very habit of thought from which the belief in a Fall arose'.³⁷ Evolution, Wells assures us, helps explain the reason for many things, including the existence of evil because, due to natural selection, 'all things are integral in the mighty scheme, the slain builds up the slayer, the wolf grooms the horse into swiftness, and the tiger calls for wisdom and courage out of man'.³⁸

Wells also predicted that Protestant Christianity would slowly decay, and many of those who abandoned Protestantism would turn to pseudoscientific cults, such as spiritualism, Eastern religions, witchcraft and devil worship. He concluded that the latter two activities were more of an expression of rebellion than of sincere belief. Gardner concludes that Wells was 'quite accurate' in this prediction.²⁴

Wells and morality

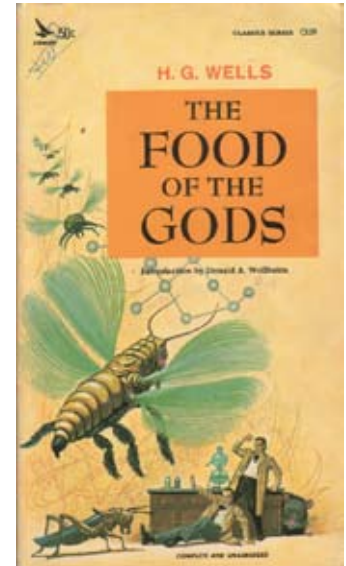
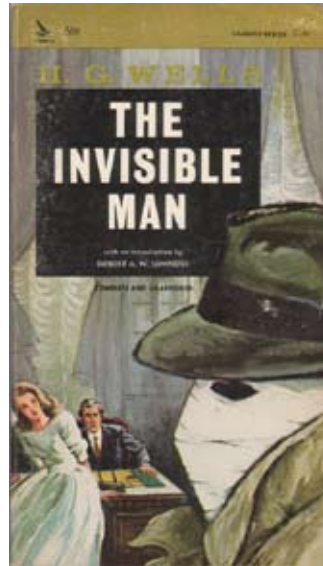
An interesting statement in his *Anticipations* is 'God is no moralist.'³² Wells also concluded that the

'sexual morality of the civilised world is the most illogical and incoherent system of wild permissions and insane prohibitions, foolish tolerance and ruthless cruelty that it is possible to imagine'.³⁹

He was an early advocate of free love, an idea that he 'scandalously' put into practice.¹ Conversely, he also strongly felt that the young should be protected from too early a sexual involvement.⁴⁰

Wells married Isabel Wells in 1891, but his 'sensual fever soon broke' and 'his eye wandered'.⁴¹ He soon had an affair with one of his young students, Amy Katherine Robbins, who was described by a friend as 'one of the prettiest girls' she had ever seen.⁴² Wells then married her and changed her name to Jane because he did not like her 'Christian' name.⁴³ She gave him two sons, ran the family household, and edited his manuscripts to make them readable. She even typed everything Wells wrote.^{41,44} Soon after the wedding, Wells was actively having affairs with other women. Jane was 'infinitely tolerant' of his escapades, and they stayed together in spite of his long string of affairs.

His casual affairs included Rosamund Bland and Amber Reeves, both daughters of friends. Among his other 'casual affairs licensed by his understanding with Jane'⁴⁵ was a 10-year affair with the famous writer Rebecca West. Wells' illegitimate son by her, Anthony West, explained that his father and Jane Wells had an 'understanding' that would allow H.G. Wells to have 'casual affairs'. Wells took advantage of this arrangement by actively living his philosophy.⁴⁵ Among the many other paramours with whom he indulged in affairs was fellow atheist and eugenicist Margaret Sanger, the woman who spent much of her life



campaigning for the sexual liberation of women and men, advocating unrestricted sales of contraceptives. She later founded Planned Parenthood.

The influence of Darwinism

Wells noted in his autobiography that he believed both T.H. Huxley and Charles Darwin were 'very great men' in that they 'fought boldly, carefully, and simply', and 'spoke and wrote fearlessly and plainly, they lived modestly and decently; they were mighty intellectual liberators'.⁴⁶ Wells' admiration for Huxley was so great that he said Huxley was 'the acutest observer, the ablest generalizer, the great[est] teacher, the most lucid and valiant of conversationalists'.⁴⁷ Wells studied both biology and zoology under him, concluding that the year he spent in Huxley's class 'was beyond question, the most educational year of my life'.⁴⁸ Wells' illegitimate son, Anthony West, stated that his father was 'in heaven, as a freshman' when he studied biology under 'the great Thomas Henry Huxley'.⁴⁹ After studying under Huxley, 'Darwinian evolution inspired Wells' writings forever after'.⁴¹

Wells speaks of evolution as uncontroversial fact, which had an 'impregnable base of proof', even concluding that the church 'had always known all about Evolution and the place of man in Nature, just as it has always known about the place of the solar system in space',³⁵ but the church preferred to hide these facts so it could keep the population in the dark.

In his later life, Wells became very ambivalent about science as our saviour, correctly recognizing that science could also become the means to evil, as happened in Nazi Germany. In the end, he believed that 'mankind was ultimately doomed and that its prospect is not salvation, but extinction. Despite all the hopes in science, the end must be "darkness still"'.⁵⁰ Wells died in London on 13 August 1946, an 'infinitely frustrated' and broken man. Borrello concluded that the Darwinism taught by 'Darwin's Bulldog',

T.H. Huxley

'imparted to Wells an understanding of life which kept alive the fires of pessimism which were to burn strongly even when Wells was hailed as the apostle of optimism. Huxley gave him that fear for man's future which precipitated the despair that darkened his final years.'⁵¹

Conclusion

Wells' life, and 'the despair that darkened his final years', speaks eloquently about the influence of Darwinism on his ideas and on his once-conservative Christian beliefs.^{29,52} In turn, Wells influenced millions of others to a life patterned after his own. Fortunately, his eugenics utopia—where 'the elites of the future will kill off the diseased, illformed or unintelligent members of the human race'—never came to pass.⁵³ Yet he is still honoured today by some; a Wells Society exists to keep his work alive,⁵⁴ and no less than 25 of his books are still in print. His memory should indeed be kept alive—not as a hero, rather as a tragic illustration of the baneful influence of Darwinism on humanity.

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Jerry Bergman is working on his ninth academic degree. His major areas of study for his past college work were in biology, chemistry, psychology, and evaluation and research. He graduated from Wayne State University in Detroit, Medical College of Ohio in Toledo, and Bowling Green State University among others. A prolific writer, Dr Bergman teaches biology, chemistry and biochemistry at Northwest State in Archbold, Ohio.

Eugenics, the selection of desired heritable characteristics to improve future generations, typically in reference to humans. The term eugenics was coined in 1883 by British scientist Francis Galton. By World War I many scientists and political leaders supported eugenics, though it ultimately failed as a science.Â Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what youâ€™ve submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! Share. SHARE.